

Tea Rock

Fall always brings to mind many lovely canoe trips into the Boundary Waters on our sister forest, the Superior National Forest. I've done it different ways, but I think my favorite is the day-tripping approach, staying in a cabin at night. Not only do you get the benefit of a cozy bed at night and a hot shower in the morning, but it allows you to travel so much lighter. In the hey-day of our outings, my mother and I would take on about 8 portages a day. You could get far enough in to experience the beauty of the area, but still make it back in time for a soothing beverage at the end of the day. Evenings were spent poring over maps, plotting the next trip.

My mother is my favorite canoe partner. Maybe that's because things are easy between her and I. Perhaps it's that our interests align. It's probably no accident that our strokes are well matched, since she is the one that taught me my way around a canoe. When we were young, my folks had a long, heavy aluminum canoe that was big enough to separate the kids with thwarts. Likely that was their way of cutting down on the squabbling.

I love to paddle along in the rock country, just taking the days as they come. From time to time, we pull out on a rock somewhere and have a cup of tea or a little lunch. You never know what you might see. Maybe it's honey-mooners quarreling at the campsite across the lake. "How come", she wants to know, "whenever I tip the canoe over it's my fault, but whenever you tip the canoe over it's no one's fault"? The answer is inaudible as the soggy pair head towards their tent and dry clothing.

Fall is the very best time for paddling, after a good frost or two knock the bugs down. One year we made the mistake of a mid-summer trip. Frequent rains made the portages into a rocky/muddy mess, and the mosquitoes certainly jacked up the miserability index as you struggled along under your canoe. We are still laughing about the soggy woman working her way out with her travelling companions. In response to my mother's light-hearted greeting (after all, she had spent the previous night in a warm and dry bed), this poor soul stated in no uncertain terms that she "would not come back to this hell hole until the dry season, if there even is such a thing"!

Because a well-paddled canoe is such a quiet way to travel, opportunities for quality wildlife sightings are especially good. I love to sit and watch a moose feeding in the water. Did you know that they will completely submerge themselves when seeking some of their favorite aquatic plants? And when they have their heads down in the water is the perfect time to edge a little closer. About the time the view is getting really good, Mom has a way of objecting. From her vantage point in the bow, she will whirl around in her seat and paddle us on out of there, pronto.

My husband can also handle a canoe, although he is hard pressed to paddle just for the fun of it. If it doesn't involve the pursuit of fish or game, I think it becomes drudgery for him. Years ago, at home on the Chippewa he suggested a little outing along the Rice River. The plan was to spend the morning with some recreational paddling, after which we were thinking to stop in at a 50th anniversary party. Being a logger, and coming prepared, he tucked a chain saw into the canoe.

I think the stretch of river we picked does not receive frequent travel, because for miles along that trip we were constantly dealing with tree after tree across the water. The chainsaw was a handy tool, and I'm sure whoever came after us had a better trip than did we. As the day drew on, things warmed up, and the man shed his jeans so that somehow I came to be in possession of a photo of a fellow in his shorts and t-shirt, back turned to the camera, water flying as the sawyer cut his way through the mess. Sadly for him, the elastic in his shorts was no longer what it should have been, and there was a constant issue of things not staying in place. Likely I should not mention that when we reached the end of our trip, the shorts were unceremoniously ripped off, and hung to rot in a tree.

Perhaps the most meaningful trip was the year Mom had so much heart trouble. She experienced heart failure, the introduction of many medications and much doctoring into her life, along with angioplasty, stent, and a pace maker. She held it as her goal to get through that time rewarded by a trip up into her favorite rock country. You could say that I was a tad nervous there would be a medical disaster. My pack was heavier on account of I was carrying extra clothes and bandages, in case she fell in and got soaked, or cut herself on the rocks. My sister came along to help, and we paddled Mom around like a Queen on the water.

As it turned out, the medical need was mine. Suffering from an inflamed tendon on the bottom of my foot, my sister was able to tape up my bum foot so that every time I picked up a canoe, that foot did not scream at me. What a blessing to have a sister that makes her living as a physical therapist! The three of us had a special time together, not the least of which was mornings spent crowding into Robin's bed for a little laughter and camaraderie.

It was probably just as well that we had not learned yet that when Mom falls these days, sometimes she breaks some bones! But even so, if she had wanted to go, I think we would have taken her... for what is the benefit to being alive if you don't allow yourself to live a little?



That was the year that Mom and I developed the concept of "van canoeing". When my sister left us, we discovered we were rather more inclined to drive around a bit, and leave the canoe on top of the van, most especially when we arrived at any boat landings. You still see a lot of nice country, and it's not near the effort.

The problem is, the canoe is getting heavier, and we are becoming more tired. I look at the pictures from a trip made with my young daughters, and think perhaps there will come a time that they will paddle me around and I will become the Queen.

by Kelly Barrett, Wildlife Biologist
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